



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge

*Planning Update 2, June 2009*



*River otter / Stan Bousson photo*

## Thank You For Participating!

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge (Kootenai NWR). This plan will guide the management of the Refuge for the next 15 years. As part of this process, we have been seeking public input on management issues, concerns, and opportunities. This second planning update provides information on the status of the planning process and the comments we have received from the public.

In January 2009, the Service distributed Planning Update #1 to 500 individuals and organizations, State, Tribal, and Federal agencies. The planning update was also posted on the Refuge's website and was available at the Refuge office and kiosks. Planning Update #1 described the CCP process; Kootenai NWR's purpose; preliminary wildlife, habitat, and visitor services goals; current management; and preliminary issues to consider in the CCP.

The update also invited the public to attend open house meetings and to submit comments in writing.

This second planning update will provide you with a summary of the comments received in public scoping and the primary management issues that will be used to develop management alternatives and refine draft goals and objectives. We extend our sincere appreciation to everyone who has provided

comments and we invite you to continue sharing your ideas with us. Your participation continues to be critical to the success of this planning effort.

## In This Update

- Public Scoping Meeting Results
- Draft Vision Statement for Kootenai NWR
- Detailed Key Issues for Kootenai NWR
- Resources for Commenting and Further Information



## What Were Your Concerns Related to the Refuge?

The public scoping period for preparation of Kootenai NWR's Draft CCP began on January 23, 2009 when two open house meetings were held in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. At these meetings, the Lead Planner and the Refuge Manager explained the CCP process; the Refuge's purpose; current management; and major issues, concerns, and opportunities. Questions from the audience were answered and verbal comments were recorded. Twenty-three private citizens and representatives from various organizations attended the meetings and provided verbal comments. Seventeen individuals and organizations provided written submittals. A total of 43 submittals, containing

198 comments, were collected during the public scoping period, which ended on March 25, 2009. The comments were primarily related to wildlife and habitat management and hunting. The CCP planning team reviewed and categorized all of the comments under major planning issues. For a detailed description of the comments received during scoping, please see the Scoping Report posted on the Refuge's website under the "Refuge Planning" quick link at [www.fws.gov/kootenai](http://www.fws.gov/kootenai)

The majority of the comments were received from people who visit the Refuge to observe or photograph wildlife, hunt waterfowl, walk, or bicycle on the Auto Tour Route. Visitors suggested: expanding

areas where the public could photograph and hunt (particularly waterfowl); restoring or improving habitat for a variety of species including native fishes; and creating boardwalks, observation towers, and photography blinds.

The CCP process allows the Refuge the opportunity to examine a wide variety of issues and take into consideration comments from the public, non-government organizations, and Tribal, State, and Federal agencies on ways to improve current conditions and the management of Kootenai NWR into the future.

## Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge

### *Draft Vision Statement*

*In a bend of the Kootenai River, nestled in a glacial valley flanked by Idaho's Selkirk Mountain Range to the west and the Purcells to the east, lies the Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge. For thousands of years, spring floods of the Kootenai River inundated the valley floor, creating the largest complex of wetlands and floodplain forests in the State of Idaho. Multitudes of ducks, geese, and swans passed through this natural funnel as they migrated between nesting areas in Canada and wintering grounds to the south.*

*During the 1920s, wetlands were drained to make way for farms, and dikes were built to hold back the floodwaters. In 1964, Kootenai NWR was established to restore a small remnant of the once-vast wetlands--a vital link between*

*protected habitats in Canada and the U.S. Tens of thousands of ducks, geese and swans visit Refuge wetlands, now managed to mimic the natural cycles of flooding and drying. Croplands complement the productivity of wetland habitats and sanctuary areas ensure that waterfowl can feed and rest undisturbed. When the winter snows blanket the land, deer and elk descend from the mountains to find*

*food and shelter here. Spring brings not only waterfowl, but songbirds that nest in the Refuge's forests and grasslands.*

*The Refuge also provides a respite for people, where visitors of all ages and abilities can experience nature directly, and develop an appreciation for the unique natural character of the Kootenai River Valley.*



*Cinnamon teal drake and hen*  
Stan Bousson photo

# What Are the Key Issues for Kootenai NWR?

## **Issue 1: How can the Refuge improve the productivity of its wetland habitats to meet Refuge purposes? What is the appropriate balance of cropland and moist soil units in order to meet the needs of migrating waterfowl?**

Several respondents wanted to see wetlands managed as more natural systems in order to benefit a wider variety of birds, such as shorebirds. One respondent suggested growing food plots to keep and hold migrating flocks of waterfowl and to leave standing stubble for geese. Another suggested planting wild rice.

Grain crops are important especially during the late fall and early winter as wetlands freeze and waterfowl depend upon agricultural lands for forage along their migration route. Originally, crops were planted on the Refuge not only to provide supplemental food for waterfowl but also to induce them to stay here longer in order to reduce depredation on adjacent farms. Today, approximately 200 acres are plowed and seeded to winter wheat and barley every year on a rotational basis. Crop fields are about equally distributed between hunt and non-hunt areas. None of the grain fields are cut, harvested, or knocked down since that would constitute "baiting." While the grain crops provide a good food source for migrating waterfowl, growing crops requires varied resources such as seed, fertilizer, herbicides, equipment, fuel, and labor. Additionally, plowing fields or allowing fields to stay in a fallow condition opens up the site to noxious weeds and does little to provide food or cover.

In Alternatives development, converting cropped wetland

bottoms into seasonal wetland management units will be considered. The moist-soil vegetation produced in seasonal wetlands would be a natural, self-sustaining, native food source for waterfowl and would require less expense and labor to maintain than grain fields. Moist-soil units would also benefit other species such as shorebirds. This would also allow the Refuge to meet the mandate to restore native biodiversity where feasible. However, not all wetlands on the Refuge are suitable for moist-soil units; therefore, the balance of moist soil and croplands will be considered during alternatives development.

## **Issue 2: How should grasslands on the Refuge be managed? Should short grass habitat for geese be provided? What should be the Refuge's role in providing winter habitat for increasing numbers of deer and elk?**

Refuge grasslands are currently managed to provide short browse for deer, elk, and geese. One respondent encouraged the Refuge to continue to provide grassland habitat for these species. All of these managed grasslands are mowed, sprayed, or burned in order to control noxious weeds, reduce thatch, and improve plant vigor. The grasslands contain a mosaic of plant species, mostly introduced "tame" pasture grasses, depending upon the site characteristics and planting history. During alternatives development, the Refuge will consider converting a portion of its existing grassland to other native habitats. Grassland nesting birds such as vesper sparrow, savannah sparrow, and northern harriers have different habitat

requirements. Key species and their habitat requirements will be taken into account in determining what areas of the Refuge can provide the largest contiguous acreage of grassland habitat and the greatest benefit to a variety of wildlife.

## **Issue 3: What are the most appropriate management techniques for the Refuge's forested habitat in order to maximize its value to wildlife, protect the watershed, and reduce the potential for wildfire?**

Two comments were received in regards to forest management on the Refuge. One suggestion was to thin trees, and reduce slash and ladder fuel loads. Another respondent suggested maintaining and restoring the forested land adjacent to wetland complexes.

To date, little forest management has occurred on the Refuge, primarily because little biological data has been collected on what wildlife species are utilizing the Refuge's forested habitat. We are conducting avian, amphibian, and mammal surveys and examining tree species composition and forest structure, so that we may identify appropriate management alternatives which will benefit key wildlife species.



*Bull moose / Stan Bousson photo*

## Key Issues Continued

### Issue 4: Should the Refuge consider the proposed land exchange with Idaho Department of Lands (IDL)?

A dozen comments were received regarding the proposed land exchange with IDL whereby 120 acres of floodplain habitat along Deep Creek (adjacent to the Refuge's southern boundary) would be exchanged for Refuge forest land of equal value. The exact acreage of forest land has not been determined at this time. Those opposed to the proposed land exchange felt that the Refuge should retain its mature forest land since this type of habitat is becoming scarce in the area.

The timber land that IDL is interested in lies along the west side of Lion's Den Road and occurs on slopes exceeding 35%. According to the Soil Survey of Boundary County, Idaho, the soils that make up this area have severe limitations for construction of roads and harvesting equipment due to slope and potential for landslides. Thus, any type of timber harvest would have to be conducted utilizing a skyline system. Lands exchanged under such an agreement would not be allowed to be encumbered by restrictions or limitations. As well as a land exchange, lease or purchase of the Deep Creek bottomlands will be considered during alternatives development.

### Issue 5: Is restoration of riparian or stream habitat on the Refuge feasible given the limitations imposed by the existing dikes and Libby Dam operations? What should the Refuge's role be in restoring native fish populations?

Several respondents felt that it was important to conduct in-stream and riparian habitat restoration and for the Refuge to play an active role in restoring native fish species.

Riparian restoration on the Refuge has been difficult due to the presence of dikes that were built prior to Refuge establishment, and operations at Libby Dam. Before the dikes were built, spring floods spread out onto the floodplain. Today, when Libby Dam increases its outflows, typically May to mid-June, water backs up Myrtle Creek and Deep Creek, which are now constricted by dikes. Not only does the backwater cause heavy siltation and bank erosion, the long duration of flooding inhibits trees from growing along the stream banks. Lack of shade to keep stream temperatures cool for salmonids is a concern. Trees and shrubs that have been planted along sloughs have also been severely impacted by white-tailed deer. The alternatives will consider how much riparian and stream restoration is feasible in this highly altered system.

### Issue 6: In what ways can Kootenai NWR address the increasing visitation and demand for wildlife-dependent recreation, especially waterfowl hunting, wildlife observation, and photography, while still providing undisturbed sanctuary areas for wildlife?

Most respondents wanted to see increased access for wildlife observation and photography, and waterfowl hunting. Some respondents were opposed to waterfowl hunting on the Refuge, while waterfowl hunters wanted to have either additional or different areas opened to hunting.

Under the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, hunting, wildlife observation, and photography are identified as three of the "Big 6" appropriate wildlife-dependent recreational uses on refuges. These uses are to be provided when and where they are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. The need for sanctuary areas free from human disturbance is also explicitly recognized in the Administration Act and prior laws. For example, although 100% of Kootenai NWR land was purchased with Federal Duck Stamp funds, the law stipulates that no more than 40% of an area acquired as a migratory bird sanctuary may be opened to hunting (all types of hunting). Disturbance caused by walking, bicycling, auto touring and other activities must also be considered when developing public use alternatives for wildlife refuges.

The CCP will address the benefits and impacts of increased public uses on the Refuge's wildlife; an appropriate balance of public use areas and



*Kingfisher / Stan Bousson photo*

## Key Issues Continued

sanctuary areas for wildlife. These are especially critical questions for small refuges like Kootenai. Since Kootenai NWR was established for migratory waterfowl, the CCP will balance the needs of wildlife with the Refuge's mandate to provide compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

### **Issue 7: How should the Refuge address increasing demands for big game and upland bird hunting and associated law enforcement and safety issues?**

Several respondents wanted to see big game hunting continued on the Refuge; one respondent suggested allowing only short range weapons. Four respondents stated that the Refuge did need an increased law enforcement presence. Several individuals wanted to see pheasant hunting allowed on the Refuge, while some opposed a pheasant hunt program if it meant reducing waterfowl hunting opportunities.

Under the current regulations, big game and upland bird (grouse only) hunting is only allowed on the west side of Westside and Lions Den Roads. Over the years, the Refuge has seen an increase in the number of hunting violations. Illegal road hunting has raised safety concerns for Refuge visitors and employees, and adjacent landowners. Another issue has been trespass into the closed area of the Refuge to pursue wounded game. Not only does this violate Refuge regulations, it also causes disturbance to waterfowl in the sanctuary area, and puts Refuge visitors and employees at risk. This increase in big game hunting violations continues to put an undue hardship upon the small staff at Kootenai NWR.

Modifications to the big game hunt program in order to ensure the health and safety of all Refuge visitors and staff, and reduce trespass issues will be considered during alternatives development.

### **Issue 8: Shall Kootenai NWR provide more environmental education opportunities?**

Several respondents were in favor of the Refuge providing more environmental educational opportunities. The Refuge has a unique historical barn which was restored to serve as an environmental education center. Due to the limited staff at Kootenai NWR, opportunities for staff-led programs have been limited. In September of 2009, the Refuge will sponsor an AmeriCorps member who will be focusing his/her efforts on environmental education. The CCP will examine the public's response to the increase in programs to determine the need for a future dedicated staff member.

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Each of the key issues affecting Kootenai NWR will be examined further as the CCP team develops alternatives. As part of the CCP process, a range of possible alternative management approaches will be explored and evaluated, including current management practices. These alternatives are different approaches to balancing the needs of wildlife, particularly migratory waterfowl, with the legal mandate to provide wildlife-dependent recreation. We encourage you to continue to be a part of the process and share your thoughts, ideas, and concerns with us. Our goal is to continue to improve the Refuge so that it can serve as a respite for wildlife and visitors alike for years to come.



*Kootenai NWR wetlands,  
looking east towards  
the Purcell Range*  
USFWS photo



Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge  
287 Westside Road  
Bonners Ferry, ID 83805

*Address correction requested*

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## How to Contact Us

To be included on the mailing list, provide comments, ask questions, or request information, please contact:

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### By Mail:

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### By Phone:

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### By Email:

FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov  
Please include "Kootenai NWR CCP" in the subject line.

**View Previous Updates at:** <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning>  
Select "Kootenai NWR" from the list.

**View the Official Refuge Website:** <http://www.fws.gov/kootenai>

*The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is:  
"To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."*



*Red-winged blackbird*  
Stan Bousson photo